

Shadows of the Dark Side

by Novus

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Shadows of the Dark Side

Shadows of the Dark Side by Paul Leone (NovusSibyl@aol.com) Rating: PG-13 - some violence Keyword(s): Jedi, Sith Summary: A young Padawan and her Mistress are sent to uncover the mysteries of the prophecy of the Chosen One by the Jedi Council. Type: Action story set shortly after The Phantom Menace. Author's Note: This is my first Star Wars fanfic. Hopefully it's not too pathetic. There's very little mention of the movie characters - if that's not your thing, leave now. Disclaimer: Star Wars and all characters and locations therein are the property of George Lucas and Lucasfilm, Inc. Everyone else is my creation. No copyright infringement is intended. Part I -----

Usko Kenobiala stared out from one of the ornate balconies of the Jedi Temple. Far below, the capital city of Coruscant gleamed in the darkness. Above, the triple moons glinted with the light of their own cities, and beyond them, the endless stars - Alderaan, Corellia, Chandrila, Kuat, and all the thousands that Usko had only heard of.

A breeze ruffled Usko's hair just as the doorway behind her opened with a hiss, then closed just as quietly. She smoothed the stray brown lock as the newcomer stepped up to the edge of the balcony beside her.

"Hi."

The word sent a shiver down Usko's arms. She frowned and turned towards the speaker. A young boy? His hair was bound in the traditional style of a human Padawan, but she'd never seen him before. "Hello," Usko finally said, realizing the boy was staring at her expectantly.

The boy smiled. "I'm Anakin Skywalker. What's your name?"

"Usko Kenobiala," Usko replied.

"Oh, wow, are you related to Obi-Wan?" the boy asked, eyes alight with curiosity.

Usko tilted her head in a half-nod. "Distantly. Are you?" she asked in return. She'd never heard of Obi-Wan having any kin the boy's age, but the two branches of their family rarely talked.

"No. I'm from Tatooine." Anakin pointed at a cluster of stars on the southern horizon. "It's there. Somewhere. Have you ever been there?"

"I don't believe so." Usko stifled a frown. Tatooine? There was something...she shook her head to clear away the thought. "How do you know Obi-Wan?" she asked with a forced smile.

"He's my teacher."

"Teacher?" There was no stifling the frown now. "Obi-Wan is your teacher? But he's just a Padawan like me." Usko tugged at the thin braid dangling over her right shoulder.

Anakin shrugged. "He said he's going to make me a Jedi. Are you a Jedi?"

"Yes, I am." Usko pulled back her cloak just far enough that the boy could see the silver-grey lightsaber hanging from her belt. "See?"

"Wow. I wish I had a lightsaber." The boy pouted momentarily then smiled again. "I guess I will someday, right?"

"Yes...someday..." The world seemed to tilt off its axis for a second. The image of a lightsaber held aloft above a field of broken bodies burned in Usko's eyes, then melted away. She couldn't help but shudder at the vision.

" - a great warrior like Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon," the boy was saying. "Right?"

"Yes, of course," Usko murmured, trying to recall the vision. There had been something else...something important...But it slipped away like water through her fingers.

"Are you okay?" Anakin asked, staring up at Usko with wide eyes.

"Just a chill," Usko lied. "It can get pretty windy up here at night."

Anakin turned and stared out at the city below. "Yeah, I guess. But not like the sandstorms at home. You should see them! They're windier than anything! But it's a lot colder here."

Usko bit back the suggestion that the boy go back inside, away from her. Instead, she took off her long grey scarf, a memento of her faraway home of Alderaan, and began to drape it over the boy's shoulders. Inches away from the boy, her hands stopped almost of

their own will. Usko frowned, drew back her arms for a second, then placed the scarf on the boy, perhaps a shade too hastily. "There you go."

"Thanks," the boy said, then turned back to his examination of the night sky.

Usko stared at him a moment longer, then whispered a good-bye and retreated into the warmth of the chambers inside.

The door shut behind her with a familiar hiss. Usko couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief. For a moment there... She frowned and tried once more to bring the vision back, but it was gone entirely. There was no point trying to grasp at shadows.

Usko sighed and adjusted her cloak. The Council meeting should be over by now, at any rate. Force willing, that would bring some good news for a change. Maybe even a trip off Coruscant, something to break the monotony of training and studying that occupied her every waking hour.

She sat down on one of the bare stone benches and closed her eyes to wait.

It wasn't a long wait, mercifully enough. Usko's eyes had barely closed when the telltale hiss signaled the doors to the Council chambers opening.

She looked up, somewhat surprised to see only one Council member, Depa Billaba, one of the youngest of the circle, standing in the open doorway. The Jedi Mistress smiled at Usko and beckoned towards the Council chamber. "The Council requests your presence, young Padawan."

"Yes, Lady." Usko bowed slightly, then followed Billaba back into the Council Chamber.

Inside, the entire Council were in their customary circle of seats. Usko's teacher, Nicosia Haza, clad in her distinctive yellow and white robes, stood in the shadows to the side. Nicosia nodded slightly, her eyes drawn tight in a look Usko recognized as suppressed frustration. What had been going on in the closed session?

Usko crossed to the center of the chamber and knelt down to the assembled Council until Yoda, the eldest of the inner circle, indicated she could rise with a wave of his tiny hand.

"Have a mission for you, we do." Yoda said, then nodded at the man to his left, a human Jedi Master named Mace Windu.

"You and Mistress Nicosia will go to the Torbun system and search the ruins of the library there."

Usko's budding smile died stillborn. "Master Windu, I do not understand. What library? Why?"

"The Torbun Ruins were once the site of a great Jedi library. Much of

our most ancient lore and tradition was born there. And," Windu hesitated slightly, "much of our knowledge of the Sith. During the wars against the Sith, our predecessors were forced to abandon Torbun. But it is our belief that much of that knowledge still remains hidden in the ruins, waiting to be discovered."

"If I may, my Lords, why me?" Usko asked, bracing herself for a verbal chiding. "Surely there are more pressing concerns for the Jedi. The Sith have been dead for a thousand years."

Yoda and Windu exchanged glances. "Believe that we did, but new facts there are. Live on, they do," the ancient Jedi Master replied.

"Now you see the importance of this task," Windu said softly. "Forces are moving against the Jedi from the shadows. We need knowledge to combat this threat. We believe that Torbun holds that knowledge."

"Go there and learn, you will. Uncover the library."

"Find the Sith lore buried beneath those ruins."

"And the lore of the prophecy of the Chosen One. On this, much depends," Yoda added, thoughtfully stroking the tiny white hairs on his cheek.

"The Chosen One?" Usko asked. That was one prophecy she had never heard Nicosia speak of.

"The one who will bring balance to the Force," Ki-Adi-Mundi, a Jedi Knight like Nicosia, explained. "It is our belief that the original prophecy is buried among the ruins on Torbun. We have asked the Senate for aid in uncovering it, and any other secrets that the ruins may hide."

"Aid they freely give," Windu added. "The Supreme Chancellor has graciously provided us with a small scoutship. It leaves for Torbun tomorrow evening - your Mistress has the details. Make use of the time to prepare yourself."

Usko nodded numbly, burying her frustration and confusion. "Yes, my Lords. May the Force be with you."

"It's the most preposterous thing I've ever heard of, Mistress," Usko whispered as they walked towards the turbolift that lead to the surface. "We're Jedi, not...digger droids!"

Nicosia held up a hand in warning. "Your temper, Usko. The others will hear you."

"Yes, Mistress." Usko bowed her head for a moment, reaching out with the Force to keep herself from blushing in embarrassment. "But it's still preposterous."

"And yet the Council wishes it. So either the Council is preposterous or your judgement is in error," Nicosia said as they stopped to wait for the turbolift. "Unfortunately, I am not at all sure what the answer is," she continued.

"Yes, I saw - surely you can convince the Council to reconsider - "

"If I were a sitting member, perhaps."

"If I was not still your apprentice, you mean," Usko said with a hesitant smile. "If I had taken the trials like Obi-Wan, ending your obligations to me."

Nicosia waved the thought away. "When you are ready, you will take the trials. Do not let jealousy of Obi-Wan cloud your heart, Usko. Even a hint of such things will doom you when the time comes."

The beep and hiss as the turbolift arrived cut off Usko's reply. The two of them entered the turbolift. It hesitated only briefly before beginning the descent to the surface.

"Mistress, I..." Usko said after a moment of uncomfortable silence. "Perhaps I have been a little envious. I will try not to." As soon as the words were spoken, Usko grimaced, knowing what her Mistress would say.

"Do or do not, there is no try," Nicosia murmured. "Remember Mistress Yaddle's teachings."

"Mistress Yaddle also said that Jedi should carry themselves with dignity and honor as befits our gifts. There is little of either in dusting off shards of ancient chamber pots."

Nicosia's crimson eyebrows arched slightly as she turned to face her student. "Would you prefer wading hip-deep in the blood of fallen soldiers, perhaps? Or slicing through an army of battle droids with your lightsaber? There is no honor or dignity to be found in that."

"Mistress, you know what I mean," Usko protested.

"No, Usko, I do not know. Your thoughts lack focus on this matter." Nicosia frowned slightly and stared at Usko. "There's something else, isn't there?"

"It's nothing, Mistress," Usko replied hesitantly.

"Usko..."

"I had a vision. I think."

Nicosia's lips pulled down in a half-frown. "You should have mentioned this earlier, Usko. What did you see?"

"I can't remember...there was a battle. I think it was a battle, at least. There were bodies all around and a light saber." Usko couldn't help but shiver. "It was very disturbing. But I can't be sure if it was a vision or just a daydream."

"What does your instinct tell you?"

Usko considered the question for a moment, then shook her head.

"About the vision? Nothing. But there was something else. I'm sure it

was nothing, but for a moment, up there, that young boy gave me a chill."

"Which boy? Anakin Skywalker?" Nicosia glanced upwards, towards the Council chamber.

"Yes, that's what he called himself," Usko replied. "There's something odd about him, I believe. I wonder if my vision is linked to him."

"Perhaps." Nicosia rested her hand on Usko's shoulder. "Don't dwell upon it. The future will reveal itself of its own will, not from our desires."

"Yes, Mistress."

As if on cue, the turbolift glided to a halt as it reached the ground floor of the Temple. The doors slid upon without a sound.

"Go and rest. Perhaps more will come to you about the vision. I will deal with the Chancellor's bureaucrats."

"Thank you," Usko said with a grateful smile. "When shall I meet you tomorrow?"

Nicosia shrugged. "I would like to leave as soon as we can, but I feel that the archaeologists might take several hours before they are ready. Scientists like them are rarely prompt. I do not believe we will leave before noon."

"Very well. I will be ready. Rest well."

"And you," Nicosia said as she made her way towards the northern spire of the Temple, where the guest quarters were located. She waved once and then vanished into the crowd waiting at the north turbolift. Usko stared a moment longer, then turned towards the grand entrance that lead to the outside world.

"We're flying in that?" Usko asked with a sinking feeling in her stomach. She squinted up at the scoutship, a large silvery vehicle shaped vaguely like an arrowhead. The underside was covered with the delicate runic writing of Alderaanian. Most of it was technical data, but Usko recognized a few of the words as fragments from prayers - decorating ships with holy writ was an ancient Alderaanian superstition.

"It will do," Nicosia replied cautiously. She too stared up at the ship with a mild look of dismay on her face. "Alderaanians are very diligent engineers," she offered after a moment. "We don't have to battle through a blockade or pirate attack, just fly it from here to Torbun and back. It will do."

"I hope so," Usko said skeptically. "I will admit, it's pretty. I guess we're artistic engineers, as well," she said with a quick smile. It was confusing sometimes to deal with her heritage - she had been born on Alderaan, to be sure, but had lived on Coruscant since the tender age of five months and hadn't returned to Alderaan until she was fifteen. No Alderaanian would recognize her as kin - she

dressed in the simple robes of a Jedi and kept her hair short unlike the 'down to the knees' style favored on her homeworld. To be honest, Alderaan was more an ideal to her than anything else. Coruscant and the Jedi Order was her reality.

"Let's just see if the ship is ready, shall we?" Nicosia made a quick gesture with her hand and a small ramp soundlessly lowered from the main hull.

"What about the ship's crew?" Usko asked as they walked up the ramp. "Are we going to fly it?" she asked in a hopeful voice. The few times when she had been allowed to pilot a starship had been exhilarating experiences (or terrifying according to Nicosia).

Nicosia laughed. "I should hope not. No, the Chancellor has provided a pilot - a Chandrillian, I believe."

"Chandrilians? Not a very technological people, I thought," Usko said as they headed towards the passenger section. She stopped and stared briefly at a painting on the wall, a somewhat bland depiction of the nineteen moons of Zara. "A spaceship with an art gallery. It could only be Alderaanian," she said.

"Don't chide people for having a measure of culture, Usko. It's unbecoming. As for the Chandrilian, it seems this one was a former Captain in the Fleet. I trust he's a capable enough pilot."

One of the hallway doors swung open and a protocol droid painted red and silver stepped out in front of the two Jedi. It stopped and made an awkward turn towards them.

"Oh! Greetings, Esteemed Madames," it said, bowing with a creak of internal gears.

Usko coughed to hide her laugh. The droid spoke with the voice of a ten-year-old boy. Someone must have played a joke on its speech module.

"Good morning," Nicosia replied absently, trying to step around the droid.

"Oh, excuse me, I'm terribly sorry," the droid said. It shuffled off to the side. "My joints are still a bit stiff. It's quite a long story, actually. I was owned by the Wookie Ambassador originally, but for some reason - "

"Yes, very fascinating, I'm sure," Nicosia said in a tone that would have frozen a bounty hunter in place. "Usko, wait here a moment. I'll go check that the digger droids have been loaded properly."

"Yes, Mistress," Usko grumbled, glaring at the talkative droid with a touch of dismay.

The droid didn't seem to notice and went on with its story as if the Jedi had not been speaking. Nicosia smiled slightly and slipped away down the hall.

"And, of course, after that I was quite in debt to the Ministry. Humans simply cannot imagine what it is like to spend six months in cold storage with a sentinel droid - they're perfectly beastly

things. I was lucky the Minister's staff found me before that brute tore me into a thousand pieces. So naturally I offered the Minister my services - I am familiar in over four million forms of communication, after all, and I know several thousand forms of interplanetary etiquette."

Usko nodded politely and glanced at the entrance to the turbolift. So close but so far.

"Sadly, the Minister, a very gracious creature, for a human, had no need for an interpreter and gave me to the Chancellor. I do wonder if the incident with the Tyvari trade delegation had anything to do with it." The droid tilted its head in an attempt at a shrug. "It wasn't my fault, of course, but the Minister did hasten me on my way after that. I do wonder...Oh, heavens, my manners! I haven't yet introduced myself. I am TR-51, archaic and Early Republic languages specialist. How do you do?" it asked in that odd childish voice.

"Quite well, thank you," Usko replied, making a point not to ask how it was feeling.

In vain, unfortunately. "That's very good. I am also doing quite well. I simply cannot wait to see the ruins of Torbun. I've heard they're quite spectacular. And the challenge of deciphering a language that has been dead for thousands of years - well! I'm sure you understand what an honor this is. It's quite possible we might earn the Star of Syvari for this."

"Mmm-hmm." Usko looked down the hallway towards the cargo hold and sighed. What was taking Nicosia so long?

"That's quite a rare honor. Only two droids in the history of Coruscant have ever earned a state medal, and neither of them were protocol droids, you see."

Usko nodded absently. No wonder the Minister, whoever he was, had pawned the droid off on the Chancellor. The thing probably wouldn't shut up without written orders.

She turned away from the still-speaking droid and stared up and down the empty hallway. The designers had gone so far as to give it a carpeted floor and genuine wood trim here and there, but, as far as Usko could remember, this type of ship carried only a single ion gun for protection. The odds that the government had covertly modified it was vanishingly small, Usko realized with a cold smile.

Usko stopped in midstep and let out a soft sigh. Why was she wondering about weapons right before a harmless scientific expedition?

She shook her head. There was no use dwelling on it. And even if she had wanted to, TR-51's constant high-pitched droning was too great a distraction. She sat down on one of the benches lining the hall and waited while TR-51 elaborated on the court languages of the southern continent of archaic Coruscant.

A few more agonizing minutes passed before Nicosia reappeared with the captain, wearing a simple blue and black tunic, in tow.

"Hello, Captain," Usko said before TR-51 could open its mouth. "Are

you ready to leave?"

"Hmm? At your leisure, Mistresses," he said with a polite bow.

Nicosia smiled slightly. "I believe it's more at your leisure, Captain Tarawa."

The captain shrugged and scratched at a scar on his chin. "Oh. Yes." I don't believe we've properly met," he said, extending a hand to Usko. "Captain Lev Tarawa."

"Usko Kenobiala," Usko said, shaking the captain's hand. "Pleased to meet you."

"Oh, the pleasure is all mine, Mistress Usko. It's not often I get to meet a Jedi in my line of work. I usually end up ferrying archaeologists from one dusty planet to the next," the Captain said. "This is a bit of a change of pace."

"I'm sure it will be quite exciting," she said, forcing herself to smile.

"Exciting might be more accurate than you think. The last expedition only stayed a week. Can you believe that? An entire planet and they only explored for a week before leaving."

"Just a week?" Nicosia frowned warily. "Why such a short time?"

The captain shrugged. "I'm just a pilot. TR-51 has their log in his memory banks, I think. You can pick his brain for the whole story."

"That might not be a bad idea. But it can wait, I think. Torbun is nearly two weeks away. I would like to see Coruscant as we leave."

Usko nodded silently. For whatever reason, Nicosia was endlessly fascinated by the view of Coruscant from space. An army of battle droids couldn't haul her away from the bridge of a ship during take-off. "I'll deal with the droid, Mistress."

"Very good. Try not to break him like the last one, hm?" Nicosia said as she turned towards the bridge. After a moment, the captain followed.

"I'll try to try," Usko called out, smiling wickedly at TR-51. "Come on, let's see what you're made of."

"Oh, my..."

"Okay, how about that?" Usko asked after adjusting the voice tuner on TR-51's speech module. There was a high-pitched beep and the cord connecting the speech module and TR-51 lit up for a second. "Go."

"It seems better. But the last sixteen changes also seemed better. Oh, dear." TR-51 shifted nervously. "Now I sound like one of those

abominable Hutts. Beastly things - we had one visit the Chancellor's Palace just last month and it oozed slime everywhere!"

"Huh. Okay." Usko picked up the hydrospanner lying on the workshop table and gave the droid's voice tuner another slight turn. "Try it now."

"Are you quite sure all this - oh, heavens, now I sound like Princess Nala of Alderaan herself. How embarrassing."

"Well, it's better than Hutts and ten-year old boys." Usko put the hydrospanner back on the tool rack and then gently eased the voice module back into TR-51's exposed chest cavity.

"Wait, what are you doing? You can't leave me sounding like this, it's treason!" TR-51 exclaimed in its new voice. "I'll be sold for spare parts for sure. Can't we just go back to my original setting, Esteemed Madame?"

"Relax. It's an improvement, trust me." Usko said as she re-attached TR-51's chest plate. "So why the Esteemed Madame, anyway? It sounds like something you'd call a Twi'lek whore or something."

"Oh, certainly not, Esteemed Madame! It is an ancient Wookie term of honor for Jedi. I was originally from Kashyyyk you see, and my primary protocol matrix includes a full terabyte on their history and culture. Did you know that no fewer than six hundred Wookies have been Jedi during the history of the Republic?"

"Is that so?" Usko asked. She twisted the last bolt into place and gave TR-51 a pat on the shoulder. "There, all done."

"Yes. As a matter of fact, one of the foremost Jedi warlords during the Fourth Colmari Insurrection was a Wookie. Will that be all, Esteemed Madame? My power cells could use some recharging."

"Yeah, you're all set. And stop calling me that, okay? Usko is fine."

"Yes, Mistress Usko." TR-51 gave the droid equivalent of a bow and began to shuffle out of the workshop.

"Actually, wait. I want to try something. Come back."

TR-51 froze and reluctantly turned around. "Yes, Mistress Usko?"

"Relax. Hold still. This won't hurt," Usko said in comforting tones. Then she let out a deep breath and stared at the hydrospanner on the desk. After a few seconds, it shifted slightly.

"Up with you...come on..." Usko whispered, glaring at the hydrospanner. It wobbled on the table for a moment, then went still. "Come on," Usko repeated urgently. She flexed her fingers and tried again, concentrating on the hydrospanner. Imagined an invisible hand catching the tool in its grip and lifting it up off the table. A tingle ran down Usko's spine as the tool jumped straight into the air. It was working!

"Stop!" she hissed. The hydrospanner froze in place a foot above the

table. She pointed at the silent droid. "Go."

"Oh!" TR-51 exclaimed as the hydrospanner slowly flew towards him.
"Oh, my."

"Shh," Usko whispered, still staring at the hydrospanner. It closed the rest of the gap between the table and TR-51, then came to a stop an inch away from one of the bolts holding the droid's chest plate in place.

"Are you sure this is safe, Mistress?" TR-51 asked nervously. "My primary motivator circuits are right behind that bolt."

"Yes. Shh." She squinted and the hydrospanner slowly fitted itself around the bolt. Another few seconds and it began to turn, loosening the bolt holding TR-51's chest plate in place. Usko let it do two complete turns, then stepped over and grabbed the hydrospanner. She retightened the plate, then put the tool back on the table.

"I've been trying to do that for months," she explained. "Okay, you can go. Thanks for helping."

The droid was halfway to the door before she had finished speaking. Usko smiled and followed it after a few seconds.

The Captain took up most of the space in the cramped cockpit. There was barely enough room near the doorway for Nicosia to stand.

She stared over the shoulders of the Captain at the twilight skyline of Capital City. Lights were just beginning to come on around the launch pad but the horizon was already aglow. The clouds above the city soon lit up, too, making the sky appear to gleam despite the late hour.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Nicosia asked, her voice soft so as not to distract from the moment.

"Mmm-hmm. Orbital Control, this is Republic Cruiser ErjaÃ©. Request permission to launch. Again," the Captain said into the comlink.

"Cruiser ErjaÃ©, what is your identification code?" a bored-sounding control droid asked.

"It's still Seriac-4120, Orbital Control," Captain Tarawa replied icily. He glanced back at Nicosia. "Do you think it would help if I invoked our Senatorial charter?"

"Knowing how Orbital Control operates, it would probably delay us another two weeks while they sorted it out, Captain."

"Yeah. Things are a lot easier out in the Mid-Rim," he grumbled. "They don't even have a landing priority list on most planets. I should never have left."

"Cruiser ErjaÃ©, you are cleared for departure," the control droid announced over the comlink. "Have a pleasant voyage."

"Thank you, Control," Captain Tarawa replied. He switched off the comm. "Sorry that took so long. I guess the evening food shipments were still coming in."

"Don't worry about it, Captain. I'm sure you will make up for the lost time soon enough." Nicosia leaned back against the rear wall and watched as Tarawa guided the cruiser off the launch ramp. In seconds, they were clear of the skyline, and within a minute the atmosphere was visibly thinning as the ship entered outer space.

"We should clear the gravity well in a few minutes. You might be more comfortable in one of the passenger rooms - "

"No need, Captain. I've sat through dozens of jumps to hyperspace, I assure you." She smiled and sent out a ripple of calming thoughts to soften the words.

The Captain shrugged and wrung his shapeless brown cap in his hands. "Yes, ma'am. Brace yourself, I'm cutting in the sub-lights." He tapped a large black button and a soft hum filled the air as the main engines sprang to life. The black starscape ahead shimmered slightly, then seemed to plunge towards the viewscreen as the ship shot away from Coruscant.

Nicosia stared out the viewscreen for a moment, then turned towards the doorway just as it opened. "Ah, there you are, Usko."

Usko stopped in the doorway and stared outwards. "We already left Coruscant? I thought I felt something, but I wasn't certain. Some more of that diligent Alderaanian engineering at work, perhaps."

"Felt with your body or felt with the Force?" Nicosia asked softly enough that the Captain could not hear.

"Both. I think. I wasn't concentrating on the outside world at the time," Usko replied in the same sub-whisper that only a Jedi could hear.

Nicosia shook her head. "You must always keep part of your mind awake to the world around you, Usko. Open yourself to the whispers of the Force."

"Yes, Mistress. But how can I tell when it is the Force whispering and not my own thoughts? I can feel the Force when I call upon it, but how will I know when it comes to me?"

"You will know. There is no mistaking the voice of the Force, Usko."

"But how can I be sure?"

"You just will. Have faith, Usko. It's as simple as that."

"But - "

"No, no buts. Meditate on it during the voyage, Usko. It is not something you will understand unless you experience it. When that happens, your training will be complete." Nicosia smiled

encouragingly. "Let that be a motivation for you."

"Yes, Mistress."

"Now, enjoy the view." Nicosia pointed towards the viewscreen. Coruscant had vanished, as had the outer planets of the system.

On cue, the Captain announced that the ErjaÃ© had cleared the gravity well of the outermost planet in Coruscant's system. Captain Tarawa glanced back over his shoulder. "We're about to make the jump to light speed, Mistress Nicosia."

"At your leisure, Captain."

Tarawa nodded and turned back to the controls. He pushed a few buttons and the darkness outside the ship exploded into hypnotic patterns of blue light as the ship entered hyperspace.

"Beautiful..." Nicosia said, staring straight ahead at the shifting lights. "I wonder if this is what it looks like to be wholly one with the Force."

"Perhaps. I've never really thought about it. I suppose we'll find out when we die."

Nicosia nodded. "Yes, I will," she said absently.

I will? "Nicosia, what is it? Have you seen something?"

"No. I was just thinking about Qui-Gon, I suppose," the other woman replied, an inscrutable expression on her face. The ashes of the fallen Jedi had been returned to Coruscant only a few days earlier and had yet to be formally interned in the necropolis below the Temple.

"Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't know you knew him well."

"We were friends when we both Padawan. It was a long time ago, though, almost before you were born. We lost touch after he became a Knight - a few years before I did. It happens."

"I'm sorry."

"It's nothing, Usko, really. Why don't you start researching those Torbun logs the Captain mentioned? I'll be down shortly."

"Yes, Mistress."

Part II -----

As it turned out, the logs were even emptier than Captain Tarawa suggested. The leader of the previous expedition, one Kiel Mieldar, had made only three entries. The first was a simple note of arrival near a cluster of ancient pyramids in the northern reaches of the main continent. The second contained a rough map of the area, showing the locations of three large temples and an ancient river port. The third and final entry was a terse message that read "Supplies running low - we have no choice but to leave Torbun."

Usko stared at the last message for a moment, then called up the second one again. There was something beneath the surface there, she felt.

"Day Three. Team One continues to work on translating the hieroglyphs in the Great Temple. No success so far. Team Two is following the old roads westward towards the Left River. Slow progress, though, as the jungle is exceptionally thick in that direction. Team Three is exploring the necropolis below the East Temple. Subsurface scans indicate more crypts below the main level. Still no explanation for the complete shift in architectural styles between the different levels."

If there was something there, it wasn't much, Usko admitted to herself. If only the reports hadn't been so short. There just wasn't enough to work with. And there was no mention of any kind of Jedi records being found. Would Mieldar have recognized them? If he had, why didn't he say so? If he hadn't, how did the Council know what was there?

"TR, wake up."

The droid jerked its head up. "Yes, Mistress?" it asked. Usko grinned - for some reason, having a servant that sounded like the Princess Royal of Alderaan waiting on her seemed fitting, or at least mildly ironic. She pushed the thought aside and returned her mind to the task at hand.

"This report is very vague. What else do you know about Torbun?"

"Not much, I am afraid. Again, it is a case of insufficient records, Mistress. What records do exist, aside from Dr. Mieldar's reports, indicate that it was first surveyed in 10,513 but rejected as unsuitable for colonization or exploitation."

"Nothing about a Jedi academy or library?"

"No, Mistress, but the records of the Jedi Council are not open to the public as I'm sure you know."

"Yeah, it's a good thing I'm not the public, huh? I'll check on that next. Was there anything after that first probe?"

"No, Mistress. If there were any settlements, they are not listed in the Republic Archives or any of the six hundred private libraries my database is linked to."

Usko tapped a few keys on the computer and closed Dr. Mieldar's logs. She stuck her datacard into the computer and brought up the Jedi Council database, then typed "Torbun" into the search field.

"Oh, great," Usko moaned when the result list, sixty thousand entries long, came up. She took a deep breath and began to read the first entry.

"Usko? Wake up, Padawan."

Nicosia's voice sounded far away, but it still cut through the mental fog wrapped around Usko's consciousness.

"Wake up." The voice was louder and more insistent this time. Usko's eyes snapped open.

She blinked twice and turned towards the doorway to her room. Nicosia was standing there, arms folded across her chest and a look of concern upon her face. Usko yawned and waved at her mentor.

"Good morning," Nicosia said, her frown melting into a grin.

"Hello. When did you change your hair?" Usko asked, pointing at the two small ponytails, one above the other, that Nicosia had pulled her hair back into. "It's different."

"Two days ago, Usko," Nicosia replied. "You've been down here almost since we left Coruscant."

"What? I - it can't have been more than a couple hours," Usko protested, then yawned uncontrollably. "It felt like that, at least."

"You were in a trance, Usko." Nicosia pointed at the computer screen. "Is Torbun such a fascinating world to steal you away from the living?"

"Fascinating? More like frustrating, Mistress." Usko rubbed her sore eyes. The effects of two days of reading data entries were beginning to hit her. Her arms felt like lead and her feet had both fallen asleep. A trip to the head would come soon, she could feel it. "The Council archives have millions of lines of text on Torbun, but it's almost all merely the titles of books stored in the library there. If there was anything else, it's been removed or hidden so well I can't find it."

"Odd...well, we still have time. Perhaps the droid can help. The poor thing seems to have an inexhaustible supply of trivia in his memory banks." Nicosia smiled slightly. "He could exhaust Master Yoda's patience."

"I don't know how much help the droid will be. There's something odd about Torbun, Mistress. I can feel it. And this," she waved a hand at the computer, "isn't encouraging. There's nothing of use about the Jedi library. And..."

"Yes, and?"

"And I'm still thinking about what the Council said. The prophecy about the one who will balance the Force. I never saw such a prophecy ever in all the time I was on Coruscant."

"I can't say I'm very surprised. It's older even than the Jedi themselves. As I recall, it says that there will come a Jedi, a great Jedi, who will defeat the Dark Side within and without and bring forth balance to the Force. That's not the exact wording. I haven't heard or read it since I was your age." Nicosia nodded at the computer. "The Council database will surely have the entire prophecy."

"I'll look. There's something else - Master Yoda said the Sith might be involved. But you and Mistress Yaddle have always taught me that the Sith were destroyed centuries ago."

"That's because they were. There are no more Sith."

"But Master Yoda - "

"Usko, even the greatest Jedi is not infallible. Master Yoda's wisdom does have limits."

"Yes, I know, but my vision, back on Coruscant. What if the Sith are connected to that?"

"You're trying to grab shadows, Usko. The Sith no longer pollute the galaxy. Whatever you saw, it was not them."

"But how can you be sure? Even the greatest Jedi is not infallible, you just said."

Nicosia shook her head. "Believe what you will, Usko. I cannot force you to see the truth."

"Mistress, I didn't mean it that way."

"Don't dwell on it, Usko," Nicosia replied. "Torbun will demand an unweighed heart...and a strong arm," she said, a touch of good humor returning.

Usko pinched her left forearm. Predictably enough, even mild pressure stung the sore flesh. "Right," Usko murmured with a trace of a smile. Practice time.

The orange-yellow glow of Usko's lightsaber was the only illumination in the otherwise pitch-black exercise room. There was perfect silence except for the sound of Usko breathing softly as she waited.

She stared into the darkness, waiting in a pose of perfect readiness. The lightsaber shifted slightly as Usko breathed in and out. With a thought, she slowed her heartbeat in preparation. Her hand tightened on the grip of the lightsaber and -

There was a sudden flash of warning and Usko ducked and pivoted on her heels just as the target droid opened fire. The stun beam hit the blade of the lightsaber and bounced harmlessly into the padded wall of the exercise room. The droid faded back into the darkness and Usko bent into a crouch.

The second attack came from her left, and was just as easily blocked as the first. Usko stepped back a pace and raised the lightsaber just slightly in anticipation.

The droid reappeared and fired twice, both shots being effortlessly deflected by the shimmering lightsaber. Again, the droid slipped into the shadows.

It did not stay there long, however. Almost as soon as it vanished,

the droid reappeared and attacked once more. This time, it fired three bolts, each of which Usko dodged, and then another three in quick succession. Usko grinned as she blocked the second set of shots with the lightsaber, moving so fast that the blade was just a fiery blur in the darkness.

More shots came, faster and closer together until Usko lost all track of the droid itself and moved on pure Force-lead instinct. The blade hummed as it twirled and spun to block the stun beams.

There was a soft click from behind Usko. Instantly, faster than her conscious mind could follow, she leapt up into the air and did a back flip, landing behind the now activated second droid. The attack from the first droid passed through the air where she had been and hit the second droid. The second droid let out a bleep of dismay and hovered to the side.

Usko risked a quick grin and dodged another blast from the first droid. It began to rain blasts down upon her, firing so fast that one beam blurred into the next, but Usko was able to block or dodge them all. Hard as it tried, the droid was unable to land a hit upon her. Usko smiled openly, despite the sheen of sweat on her face, and let her reflexes take over as the droid continued to attack.

This is too easy, Usko thought to herself as she hopped into the air to avoid getting hit in the legs. As if on cue, there was a pair of familiar clicks, one from each side. Usko reached out with the Force and tried to grasp onto one of the light-tubes affixed to the ceiling, but her mental grip slid off it like water. Surprised and desperate, she tried to pivot in midair, but too late - a pair of stun-beams hit her in the ribs.

She let out a muffled curse and dropped to the ground as the three active droids chirped victoriously. Usko shook her head and tapped the control button attached to her belt. All four droids blinked at her and hovered back to their station on the far wall.

"Fifteen minutes, six seconds."

Usko turned and waved at Nicosia as she replaced the lightsaber on her belt. "Not my best time, Mistress," she admitted, then added "The third and fourth droids took me by surprise."

"Unfortunately, enemies rarely announce themselves," Nicosia replied drolly. "But you did well. That maneuver with the lights was clever. It probably would have worked if I hadn't blocked you."

"You blocked my grip on the light-tube? Why?"

Nicosia snapped her fingers and one of the spare stun guns lying next to the droids shot towards Usko's head. Usko reached out and plucked it from midair a second before it would have clipped her ear. "There. You must not let your reflexes suffer because of reliance on the Force. There may be times when your powers will not help you. When that happens, your body must be ready to save you from danger."

"Yes, Mistress." Usko frowned slightly. That was a basic lesson, one that had been taught to her by Yaddle and the other trainers when she was barely five years old. Of course Jedi Knights must keep their

physical strength at a peak. That's why they trained whenever possible, why she was working out with the practice droids. But why was Nicosia behaving so oddly lately? What had she seen?

Nicosia laughed suddenly. "I suppose I should practice what I preach. Set the droids to Level 5," Nicosia said as she slid her lightsaber off the leather belt. She tapped a button and the blade, a deep blue, nearly purple, in hue, appeared. Nicosia smiled and eased into a defensive position.

Usko tapped the Activate button on the droid control unit. The four droids, plus one more that had sat dormant earlier, floated off their stations and took up attack positions in a circle around Nicosia. Another tap of the button and the lights went off. Except for her face, which had taken on a strange purple hue, Nicosia was barely visible in the indigo glow of her lightsaber.

"Go," Nicosia whispered, an uncharacteristically feral grin on her face.

Usko hit the Start button. Instantly, all five droids opened fire. Even as they did, Nicosia exploded into action. She jumped straight up into the air, a good five feet, and spun as if standing on an invisible platform. Her lightsaber twirled and weaved, deflecting each shot straight back at the shooter. Each droid, in turn, beeped angrily and withdrew before launching a second volley.

Nicosia effortlessly deflected the new attacks, moving faster than Usko could follow even with her preternatural eyesight. The droids rained blasts down on her, but Nicosia blocked them all, sending most right back at the droids.

Finally, after what felt like an hour, Nicosia deflected one last volley of stun beams, then shut off her lightsaber as the droids beeped in disappointment and returned to their station. She hadn't even broken a sweat.

"Thirty four minutes. Not bad," Usko said after a few seconds of quiet awe, all the more so because Nicosia had done it without the aid of the Force. "I pity your enemies."

"Time will tell," Nicosia replied. She fit the lightsaber back on her belt and left without a word.

Usko stared after her for a moment, shaking her head, and followed silently. What was going on in the galaxy? Everything was off center since that meeting with the young boy in the Temple. Inane research missions, Nicosia acting so oddly, her visions, the Sith. Where would it end?

Part III -----

The planet Torbun wasn't much to look at from orbit. Eighty percent of its surface was covered in shallow salty oceans, with a few scattered islands and a pair of larger continents in the southern polar region. There was very little vegetation, a single chain of low hills that could never be mistaken for mountains, and no fresh water.

"Why would the Council have built a library here?" Usko asked as she

studied the sensor readouts. "It's just a big ball of salt water."

"Solitude, perhaps," Nicosia guessed. "Or perhaps the oceans did not exist when the library was built."

"That's possible. But could an entire planetary ecosystem transform itself so fast?"

"It's been thousands of years, Usko. Life finds a way to work its will in far shorter time. Stop there," Nicosia said, pointing at one of the sensor readings from a mid-sized island in the northern hemisphere. "That is where we should land."

The captain nodded in agreement. "The cluster of ruins is two klicks north of this river. There's a clearing the Erjañ© should be able to touch down in right here." He highlighted a spot on the map. "Perfect, two hundred meters across. The Erjañ© should fit nicely."

"How far is it from the ruins?"

"Eight kilometers. That's the closest I can get, I'm afraid."

"Don't worry. We've got a droid in the hold that should be able to clear a path."

"Hang on..." Tarawa said, staring down at the computer screen. He tapped a button and the readings skipped back a few frames. "Thought so. Found another temple for you. It's ten kilometers east of the main complex." He frowned and adjusted one of the control dials. "Weird. It's giving some funny readings, almost like there was a low-level sensor jammer down there."

"Could be something in the soil. Uranium deposits or some kind of mineral."

"Maybe..." The Captain leaned forward to take a closer look at the new temple.

Usko frowned and tried not to pace in the narrow confines of the cockpit. There was something...A disturbance in the Force, near at hand.

"You feel it too, don't you?" Nicosia asked in a whisper.

"Yes. Something is wrong. I can't grasp it. It's like a shadow in my mind."

Nicosia nodded grimly. "It's the Dark Side. Something down there is very strong in it."

"Sith?"

"Most likely," Nicosia admitted. "Or at least something similar. Not that it truly matters."

"You see something else, don't you? I've felt it since we left Coruscant. You've been on edge the whole time. Please, Nicosia, tell

me what it is."

"It's nothing, Usko. Trust me."

"How can I trust you when you lie to me like this? I can feel your worries. Tell me, perhaps I can help."

"Can you?"

"I can try," Usko replied, her voice rising.

Nicosia snorted angrily. "Try, then. Turn back years with a dance. Steal the great Hourglass of Time from the Elder Gods. Give me back my youth with a gimer stick while you're at it," she spat out, then took a deep calming breath.

"What have you seen, Mistress?" Usko asked gently. "Remember Mistress Yaddle's teachings - the future is not fixed. It need not happen as you see."

"I - "

"Oh, thank heaven, Mistresses! Those wretched target droids have been tormenting me without mercy!" TR-51 shrieked as it ran into the sensor suite. "Horrid little things!"

"TR, not NOW," Usko hissed, putting the full strength of the Force behind the words. It was enough to bring all conversation in the room to a stop for a few seconds. Usko glared at the Captain, who quickly took the hint and went back to his computer screen.

The droid shrank back and let out a muffled whimper, then nodded. "Yes, Mistress," it whispered. "I shall go try and evade those beasts now, if you please."

"Yes, go." Usko shook her head and turned back to Nicosia, but she had moved and was standing next to the computer again. Damn it.

"Ha! I knew it. There is some kind of jammer on one of the temples, or inside it.

"We'll look into that, Lev," Nicosia added in a husky whisper. "You can set up camp while we do."

"Right - you can look into that, Captain. I'll set up camp while you do," the Captain repeated.

Usko stared in horror at Nicosia. *What are you doing?* she cried out mind to mind. *You twisted his thoughts!*

Later was Nicosia's only reply. Usko shivered and stepped back a pace.

"Got it. As soon as you Jedi give the word, we can begin the landing," the Captain was saying.

Nicosia turned back towards the Captain with an annoyed frown upon her face. "Captain, I should hardly need remind you that this is your ship. You are in command. We're just here as observers."

"Uh-huh. My orders from the Supreme Chancellor himself and your Council are to defer to you, Mistress Nicosia." "Take us down, Captain," Nicosia said with a weary sigh. She stepped out of cockpit and began to walk towards the aft cargo hold "The perils of the Jedi reputation."

"Better that we are respected than hated," Usko offered. She reluctantly kept silent about Nicosia's manipulation of Tarawa, sensing that would only start another argument when she least wanted one.

"That wasn't respect, Usko. That was obedience. There is a difference...I sometimes fear we've forgotten that." She smiled and shook her head. "I sound like some drunken street prophet now. I must be getting old."

"Old? Mistress, you're not even forty. Don't say such things," Usko replied nervously.

"Don't worry. The Force will call me when it chooses. There's nothing to be done or feared about it."

"Yes, but - you can't die yet. You haven't completed my training. I won't let you," Usko said with a smile. Come on, Nicosia, stop this. "I forbid it, Mistress."

Nicosia smiled back at Usko but said nothing. "I think it might be more productive if you stayed on ship and continued your research while I and the droid explored this new temple."

"What?"

"The sentence speaks for itself," Nicosia replied calmly. "We can better accomplish our goals that way."

"You expect me to tap away at a computer while you go face whatever is down there alone?"

"We don't know that anything is there..."

"Mistress, do not do this. There's no heroism in suicide - "

Nicosia cut in with a worried wave of her hand. "Usko, are you okay? Your face is pale as ice."

"What?" Usko asked impatiently, brushing Nicosia's hand away. "I feel - " She stopped and blinked. Stars appeared to dance before her eyes. "What?"

"You look like you're about to faint," Nicosia added, worry lining her face.

"I - " Usko shivered at the tickling sensation running up her spine and into the back of her mind, and then gasped in sudden realization. "You!" she exclaimed just as blackness began to swallow the edge of her vision. "Mistress, no!"

"Trust me," Nicosia whispered as Usko swooned and fell to the ground,

unconscious before she felt the sharp smack of her head hitting the cold floor. "Trust me."

Usko awoke with a pounding headache that vanished after a moment's concentration, leaving only a dull, empty feeling behind. "Oh, thank goodness! You're awake, Esteemed Madame!" TR-51's worried, girlish voice exclaimed.

"I can't see you," Usko moaned, rubbing at her eyes. She almost laughed when she felt a thick layer of medical gauze wrapped around her head, then quickly tore it off. "Nicosia! Where - "

"She left some hours ago, Esteemed Madame, and was quite - " TR-51 let out a startled squawk as Usko jumped up and pushed him aside to reach the door. "Insistent," it finished, barely managing to keep its footing.

Usko tore down the hallway, thankful that Nicosia hadn't thought to hide her lightsaber after she'd knocked her out. There was no time to waste looking for it, or finding a spare blaster.

The captain appeared, his hands raised in a 'slow down' gesture, but one look at the anger and fear on Usko's face was enough to make him step aside.

The ramp was only a half-minute away and, thanks to the Force, was already open when Usko reached it. A wave of cold, salty air hit Usko as she ran down the ramp, but she ignored it.

At any other time, Usko would have stopped to admire the gigantic yellow fungi and brown crystalline thorn bushes that poked up from the dry, moss-covered ground, but none of that so much as registered in her mind as she raced through the strange forest. Dry mushrooms cracked under her boots, giving off clouds of dust, but Usko ignored that, too.

Usko could still sense Nicosia, far off but still alive. She increased her pace, running right through a small briny pond that blocked her path. No time to go around. She could feel Nicosia in the distance, but also a second presence - one that radiated evil like nothing Usko had ever encountered before. The nauseating sensation of the Dark Side only grew stronger the closer Usko got, while Nicosia seemed to grow weaker. As Usko ran, she slipped the lightsaber off her belt, activated it and impaled a local predator animal as it was about to pounce down on her from atop one of the giant mushrooms, all without even turning her head from the distant hilltop that she knew was her destination. Only three kilometers to go.

The hilltop, Usko realized as she drew closer, was a pyramid, not a hill at all. And atop it - Nicosia!

Even from hundreds of meters away, Usko could see Nicosia's lightsaber twirling and spinning as it parried the lightning fast blows of a dark robed attacker. It was too far away to make out who the attacker was, but Usko could guess, and her guesses were almost as troubling as what she knew for sure. Whoever it was was strong in

the Dark Side. Usko's grip tightened on the lightsaber as she ran even faster towards the pyramid.

What could it be that gave off such feelings of pure evil? A Sith Lord, despite what Nicosia had said earlier and what the Council had always taught? Or a fallen Jedi? The Council always denied such things existed but it was no secret that not every Padawan resisted the call of the Dark Side. Or something else, something entirely alien?

Usko grimaced and forced the thoughts into the back of her mind. There was no time. She sprinted up the slight incline of the mossy plains, racing towards the pyramid faster than she had ever ran before, faster than she thought possible.

Fast as she was, though, it wasn't fast enough. There was a sudden burst of sparks atop the pyramid, and then a grunt carried by the winds and Usko's heightened senses. Nicosia toppled over and gracelessly tumbled down the side of the pyramid.

The world went black as Usko watched Nicosia's body somersault down the hard stone steps of the pyramid. She felt, more than saw, herself run up the steps of the pyramid and stop at the top, then attack the dark Jedi, a tall blue-skinned humanoid in elegant black robes. In her anger, she could sense everything about him - his name, Darth Joss; his ancient task of guarding the Sith lore below; his glee at slaying Nicosia - here, the rage overwhelmed Usko and she felt herself use the Force to pick up the loose rocks lying atop the pyramid and hurl them at the Sith Lord with bone-shattering force. The dark warrior deflected or destroyed many of the stones, but enough got through to knock him down. Usko smiled as she attacked Darth Joss, striking faster than she thought possible. Her smile only widened as the Sith managed to block most of her blows, despite his injuries.

A small part of Usko couldn't help but respect such a capable fighter, one so strong in the Force...or at least a certain aspect of it. She could feel the Force answer Joss' call and quicken his arms, but it wasn't enough. Slowly, centimeter by centimeter, she forced him back towards the edge of the pyramid, smiling all the while. Finally, she managed to sweep the Sith Lord's legs out from under him with a quick kick. Joss' lightsaber flew from his hands and vanished into the ground far below. Usko kicked him again, then pressed her foot into his chest, pinning him to the ground.

"Where's your Dark Side now?" Usko asked with a cold grin on her face.

To her surprise, Darth Joss smiled back at her, hissed something in his alien dialect, and nodded his head towards her.

It was too much. Usko flicked her wrist and ended the Sith Lord's life with a single slash of her lightsaber.

Usko didn't spare the fallen warrior another thought as she hurried back down the pyramid to the side of her mistress. She couldn't help but wince - Nicosia had been cut badly, right across the chest, and her arms and legs were smashed horribly, as was her face.

Despite that, Nicosia found the strength to speak. "Usko...what did

you do?" she asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Shh, Nicosia, lie still, I'll call for help," Usko replied urgently, trying to stem the flow of blood with the Force. But the wounds wouldn't close. She frowned and tried again, but something was resisting her efforts. "Mistress!"

"Don't taint me..." Nicosia whimpered, coughing up blood. "Stay 'way..."

"What? Mistress, no!" Usko pushed harder, desperately trying to seal up the wounds, but Nicosia resisted with the last of her strength, then let out a final cough and lay still, Usko's hands pressed atop her robes.

Part IV -----

The Council chambers were chillier than Usko remembered. She shook her head slightly. It's just a trick of the mind. Ignore it.

The real chill was from the members of the Council. Almost to a man, they stared at her in tight-lipped silence.

Usko met their gazes stoically. She could sense they had already come to a decision in the closed session, but there was always a chance.

Finally, Yoda spoke softly. "Your actions...much anger was in them."

There it was. Usko managed not to bow her head even though she knew instantly where this was going. "I did only what was needed to defeat the Sith warrior."

Mace Windu leaned forward with a slight scowl upon his face. "Anger is never needed by a true Jedi. Your weakness troubles us," he said, gazing straight into her eyes.

"Weakness?" Even after mentally preparing for this conversation for days, Usko could hardly believe what the Council was saying. "I had just watched my Mistress die in front of me. That Sith BUTCHERED her. What was I supposed to do?"

"We share your grief, but a Jedi cannot allow herself to succumb to negative emotions," Depa Billaba said in her lilting accent. "That is the surest path to the Dark Side."

"And you abandoned your mission, even after the threat had ended. Is this the depth of your commitment to the Order?" Windu asked. "Now we must dispatch another ship to Torbun to search the ruins there. Your hastiness is disturbing...What do you have to say in your defense?"

Usko shrugged. "I can see you have already made your decision. Spare me your hypocrisy and say it," she said, still matching Windu's annoyingly earnest gaze.

"Very well. It is the decision of the Council that you be removed from the Order and reassigned to the Agricultural Corps as a Special Advisor."

It was all Usko could do not to laugh out loud. The AgCorp? She just smiled and let out a breath she didn't know she was holding.

"If I'm to be driven from the Order, so be it. But I won't let you dictate my life any more. I won't spend the rest of my life nurturing wheat crops on Chandrila or hunting treemite nests on Alderaan. This Council is a joke. You let great Jedi like Mistress Nicosia and Qui-Gon die while you sit her in this ivory tower pontificating away without a hint of real understanding. The Republic could rot around you and you wouldn't recognize it until it hit you right here in this pampered throne room. I've had enough of it. You can toss yourselves into a black hole for all I care." She spun on her heels, savoring the stunned looks on the faces of the Council members, and strode out of the room without another word, her dark grey robes swishing along the floor behind her.

Epilogue -----

Usko straightened the front of her robes for the tenth time since entering the turbolift. She had to look impeccable for this meeting. Sure, the man had all but sworn to hire her, but there was no sense taking risks. Until the first deposit got entered in her account, it was just shadows and wishful thinking.

She smiled and banished the nervous thoughts with the help of the Force. No time for pessimism.

The turbolift slowed and came to a stop at the top floor. Usko smiled as the doors swung open, revealing an incredibly posh foyer complete with a bubbling fountain and dozens of exotic plants, including two massive trees that changed colors with every rustle and sound. There were also two guards - tall, cold-eyed men in dark red cloaks that couldn't quite conceal blast vests and hidden pistols. The large mirror to the right hid two more guards and probably a heavy repeating blaster to deal with determined intruders.

"Hold," the taller (by a matter of millimeters) of the two visible guards said, holding up one hand. The other hand held a blaster pistol not quite aimed at Usko. "Name?"

Usko wasn't overly annoyed at the rude treatment. Not everyone was a Jedi who could sense danger from a kilometer away. She smiled and gave her name. The guard nodded briskly and stepped aside, opening a path to the inner chambers, the doors of which slid open as Usko approached.

Inside, it was even more luxurious than outside. Statues from a dozen different worlds, each worth more credits than Usko had ever seen in her life, sat in shadowy alcoves on the fringes of the room. A few sculptures and paintings, including a signed Hari Seldon worth a king's ransom, hung on the walls. This man has taste, Usko found herself thinking. The pieces, despite their vastly different styles, fit together. It was very stylishly done.

"Ah! So good to finally meet you in person." The words broke Usko from her examination of the artwork. She smiled and bowed to the man as he entered from the balcony. "Welcome."

Usko bowed with a smile. "The pleasure is mine, sir. I can't thank

you enough for meeting with me, despite what the Council must have said."

"Oh, think nothing of it. I wanted to meet this dastardly lady that had gotten such poor treatment from the Council. They made you sound so sordid and yet here I find you a charming young woman! The Council was insane to let you slip away."

Usko smiled again, instantly liking the man. "Thank you, sir." Does this mean...?

"Naturally, there's always room on my staff for someone of your special talents," the man continued. "Especially in these troubling times. If, of course, you're still interested in the offer."

"Oh, yes sir!" Usko replied quickly, still afraid this would all turn out to be a dream. "I'd be honored."

"Well, then, a drink to celebrate!"

From nowhere, a woman in maroon robes appeared with a tray of beverages in hand. Usko took a goblet of Alderaanian wine while her host settled upon a tall glass of some silvery liquid.

"To your new position, Miss Kenobiala," he said, raising the glass into the air.

"To YOUR new position, Chancellor Palpatine," Usko replied with a warm grin. Things were finally looking up for her.

The End -----

End
file.